

Third world needs agricultural development, not food aid say scientists

The IDRC's senior science writer, David Spurgeon, reports on a recent symposium on "Canada and World Food" held at Ottawa's Carleton University.

Among the speakers at the symposium were Dr W. David Hopper, President of the IDRC, and Ruth Zagorin, Director of the Centre's Social Sciences and Human Resources Division. Their respective topics were the politics and the sociology of food. Highlights of their presentations are included in these pages.



Photo: Agriculture Canada

Canadian wheatfields — keeping poor farmers poor?

The purpose of the symposium, sponsored by the Agricultural Institute of Canada and the Royal Society of Canada, was to consider "the world food situation as it relates to Canadian productivity, its economic circumstances, foreign policy and the extent to which countries may want our assistance."

A recurring theme was the need for developing countries to give greater emphasis to agriculture and food production in their national policies. There was considerable debate over the propriety of food surplus countries like Canada continuing to supply food aid (other than emergency relief) to developing countries, and a number of speakers said food aid should be tied to requirements that recipients do more to increase their own food production, but there was no consensus on this point.

There was general agreement, however, that world agriculture was capable of meeting the demand for food in the near future, and that the problem of shortages was essentially political in nature, rather than economic or even scientific. There was also agreement that much remains to be done. As Dr Frank Sheffrin, Director of the Canada Department of Agriculture's International Liaison Service, put it: "We have managed to avoid mass famine, but we have not been able to give a consistency to the efforts to overcome food shortages over time and in different parts of the world."

Dr Sheffrin added that just to maintain 1970 food consumption levels would require an annual increase in food production in the developing countries of 3.6 percent, compared to the present growth rate of 2.6 percent. Even if this objective were reached, it would still fall short of the goal of a 4 percent increase targeted for the second UN Development Decade.

Dean of University of Manitoba's faculty of agriculture, Dr Len Shebeski, said he believes agricultural lands in Canada have the potential for more than three times their present production of field crops, and more than 10 times the present ruminant livestock production.

But the cost of such development would be enormous, and he did not think food destined for developing countries should be produced in such a way. Instead he proposed that the Canadian government channel equivalent funds to developing countries to bring into production lands with huge agricultural potential, such as the Indus-Ganges-Brahmaputra plain of North India.

Dr Kenneth Hare, of the University of Toronto's Institute for Environmental Studies, added an ominous note when he spoke about the possible effects of climatic change on the world food situation. It is now clear there has been a genuine increase in climatic variability, he said, and he expects the variability to continue. These changes will continue to "rock the boat of agricultural production."

And Dr Nathan M. Koffsky, of the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, who predicted food shortages for half the world's population by 1990, added this grim warning: "It would be well to keep in mind that good weather and good crops such as have been the case in the last three years can, and likely will, give way to bad weather and poor crops. For those who live on the edge of hunger, the food crisis could be back again full blown."